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ABROAD AT HOME

The Savor of SALT

By Anthony Lewis

WASHINGTON — The instinctive American skepticism toward absolute claims should serve the country well as it debates the second strategic arms limitation agreement in the months ahead. For what is at issue is not perfection but the balance of advantage: whether ratification of the treaty would on balance make us more or less secure.

The point is well illustrated by the question of verification, which will play a crucial part in the debate. American experts know in extraordinary detail the mechanics and the performance of the Soviet Union's present strategic weapons. They say they are confident that we will be able to monitor changes in or additions to that armory.

But there is no such thing as absolute knowledge of what the Russians are up to, in this or any area. There will always be a band of uncertainty. The question, rather, is whether the uncertainty would be greater with the treaty or without it.

When the verification issue is viewed in those terms, I think the case for SALT II is strong. In three fundamental ways the treaty enhances our ability to monitor Soviet activity. If the treaty were to fail, the band of uncertainty would be greatly broadened.

First, the treaty binds the two parties not to interfere with "national technical means" of checking compliance with its terms. That includes not only satellites but trawlers, planes and stationary electronic equipment.

The idea of technical spying does not seem surprising to us nowadays; the concept has become accepted under SALT I. But back in the 1960's there was real American concern that the Soviets would not accept it — that they would denounce satellite surveillance, for example, as a violation of national sovereignty. And without agreement on the point they could still jam our apparatus or even shoot down satellites.

Second, the parties agree not to conceal anything in a way that would prevent effective monitoring of compliance with the treaty. The importance of this provision is that it allows either side to raise questions way short of any actual evidence of cheating — if missiles are hidden by new structures, for example.

There is a philosophical as well as a technical point in these aspects of the treaty. They legitimize the idea that strategic weapons developments are not exclusive national secrets — that there is a larger interest in letting the other superpower know. Because the United States is an open society, in which new weapons systems always involve public debate, it is an enormous advantage for us to have the Soviets accept this principle.

Third, the treaty would continue and broaden the arrangement made under SALT I for immediate discussion of any questions about compliance. The earlier treaty created a Standing Consultative Commission for this purpose, and it has actually worked as an effective device to explore suspicions of violation.

For example, American experts became concerned a few years ago about the possibility that a Soviet anti-aircraft missile was being converted to an antiballistic missile system. What made them suspicious was the use of a certain type of radar with the missile. When the U.S. raised the issue the radar was withdrawn from that use, giving assurance that the missiles were not in fact being converted.

In another episode, the Soviets came to the Standing Consultative Commission and said they were running behind schedule on some dismantling of old devices under SALT I. They sought an extension and got it in return for delay in installing new devices. Because the U.S. was informed, fear and tension were avoided.

In short, the two SALT agreements institutionalize consultation on these

matters. Without a treaty in operation, the forum for raising such concerns would simply not exist — and there would be a significant, a destabilizing, loss of confidence.

Of course the Senate must be satisfied that American officials will vigorously raise any suspicions within the SALT compliance framework. But it is extremely important to appreciate the benefits to this country of having a recognized forum for serious, technical discussion with the Soviets on nuclear weapons: the benefits in knowledge and assurance and stability.

Genuine belief in the comparative advantages of SALT II, on verification and other issues, must explain why Administration officials are going into this battle with more sense of confidence than in many others. Secretary of State Vance put it the other day:

"The issue is really a simple one: Does the treaty enhance our security and our allies'? Are we better off with it or without it? I think the facts will show that we are infinitely better off with it. I have faith that we can convince the Senate and the American people."